

“A Study of the Nation’s First CEO.” Rev. of **His Excellency: George Washington**, by Joseph J. Ellis, Alfred A. Knopf, 320 pages, \$26.95

By Elinor F. Foster

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Fayetteville is famous for “History, Heroes, and a Hometown Feeling” and is in fact named for a hero who dates back to the American War of Independence, the Marquis de Lafayette. The young French nobleman was a favorite of America’s greatest Revolutionary War hero, the man who may be considered the greatest hero in the history of our nation, George Washington. Indeed, among other notable founding fathers (including Franklin, Madison, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Adams), he was acknowledged as their superior, referred to as “His Excellency” in the form of respectful address that was then contemporary and familiar to shapers of the new American nation.

Much has been written about the hero who has now slipped back in the national memory to the status of an icon, whose image appears on currency and Mt. Rushmore. Multivolume biographies based on facts including those contained in Washington’s letters have been produced, as were the fables of Parson Weems. In recent years Washington has not been a favorite topic of authors of books who aggrandize heroes; in fact the studies have tended to focus on Washington retrospectively, particularly in terms of how his era contrasted with current politically correctness. Specifically, Washington’s status as a slave holder and his association with those who seized lands once held by Native Americans have been criticized.

His Excellency: George Washington is contemporary historian Joseph J. Ellis’s carefully researched and thoughtfully presented portrait of George Washington the man. His goal is to peel back the years, the different eras of Washingtonian scholarship, and examine the powerful, ambitious, and goal-oriented personality who led American patriots through rebellion, war, the shaping of the new American democracy, and the first presidency. Joseph Ellis is a skillful historian and biographer whose *Founding Fathers* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001, and his book about Thomas Jefferson, *American Sphinx*, won the National Book Award in 1997.

Ellis discusses Washington’s birth in 1732 and early life in Virginia, the marriage which brought him wealth, the military career that spanned the French and Indian War and the American Revolution, his career as a planter and master of Mount Vernon, his leadership as the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution were developed, the two terms as President, and the final years left to Washington after leaving office before his death in 1799.

Two thorny issues which have seemed to cast Washington in a negative light to later generations, his dealings with the American Indians and his status as a slaveholder, are carefully examined in *His Excellency*. Washington knew the value of alliance with the Native Americans and understood their concerns about the loss of territory and broken treaties; yet he prided himself on his extensive Western land holdings, and it was Washington’s vision that one day the new nation would reach the Pacific.

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The conflicting interests of the European settlers and the native peoples were intuited by Washington, who sought to establish territorial rights for the Native Americans but also conceded that American westward expansion would eventually violate the treaties. The conflict for Washington and numerous others was between what was morally right and the desire to attain personal wealth.

As for the matter of slavery, which was legal but morally troubling to many, Washington included, George Washington was pragmatic about this problem also. His conscience troubled him about his status as a slave owner but as a man concerned with maintaining his wealth, he valued the slaves as laborers and part and parcel of his wealth. Too, he was concerned that if he freed the slaves there would be no one to care for those who could not work, the elderly, young, and infirm. Ultimately, the solution Washington arrived at for dealing with his dilemma was to free the slaves he owned in his will, but not those that had been inherited through relatives of his wife. He gave up his property but continued to respect others' rights of ownership.

Obviously Washington could not in his lifetime dissipate all the intricacies of these complicated problems that perplexed him and succeeding generations of Americans so sorely. Indeed, vestiges of these troubling topics are still being dealt with in contemporary American society.

Joseph Ellis provides an excellent background study of the times in which Washington lived and the life events which shaped him. His skills as a military leader served him well as the first chief executive officer of the nation. He was fabled for his courage in battle and his honesty, and his successful experiences as a leader who relied on talented advisors to assist him in waging war and leading a new government set the pattern for successive leaders of the executive branch of the American government.

The reader of *His Excellency: George Washington* will be the recipient of a coherent picture of the first and perhaps greatest American hero. Washington as he was regarded during his lifetime and his legacy of impressive accomplishments are succinctly described. The reader will benefit from gaining skillfully described insights into the life of a hero who was also a man of his times.

As is true of us today, George Washington had to contend with the circumstances of the times and society in which he found himself. How he did so in the core value of *His Excellency: George Washington*.

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